

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

This Environmental Assessment (EA) addresses a proposal by the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) to reinstate passenger rail service on the existing Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) corridor between Los Angeles, California and Las Vegas, Nevada enabling travelers between these two cities the option of traveling by train rather than by personal automobile, bus, or airplane. In order to provide this service, the UPRR must first construct a second mainline track adjacent to its existing mainline track for a distance of 19-miles between the towns of Kelso and Cima, California. The project corridor is located entirely within the boundaries of the Mojave National Preserve (the “Preserve”) managed by the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS must issue a Special Use Permit for use of the Preserve roads to access the corridor. The issuance of the Special Use Permit constitutes a federal action that must comply with requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The NPS is the federal lead agency responsible for preparing this EA.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The NPS has determined that federal action is necessary to achieve the objectives of the project: 1) to reinstate passenger rail service on the UPRR tracks between Los Angeles and Las Vegas; 2) to promote the restoration of Mojave National Preserve lands consistent with the long term goals of preservation for NPS lands; and 3) to respond to UPRR’s proposal to construct a new second mainline track between Kelso and Cima.

Construction of a new second mainline would provide a passing lane for the passenger trains over the Cima Hill and allow passenger trains to travel the corridor unimpeded by slower freight trains.

ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action (Agency Preferred and Environmentally Preferred Option)

The Proposed Action will construct a new second mainline track adjacent and 20-feet east of the existing mainline track. The new track will include operational and safety features such as a signal system, set-out tracks, and universal crossovers. The new mainline track would be located entirely within the existing UPRR right of way which was granted by U.S. Congress in 1906, on an embankment that was placed in the early 1980s. The proposed Action would require the redistribution of 52,700 cubic yards of soil along the existing embankment, the removal of 40,812 feet of existing siding tracks, and the installation of 19-miles of new mainline track. Twenty-six existing bridges and 14 existing culverts will be made wider to accommodate the second mainline track.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action alternative, the second mainline would not be constructed and Amtrak could not provide passenger rail service between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. There would be no change in the current operations and maintenance practices of the railroad.

Actions Considered but Rejected

The UPRR has considered alternatives to the Proposed Action, in addition to the No Action alternative described above, but has rejected them as infeasible and not meeting the project's purpose and need. The following alternatives were considered but rejected.

1. Improve the existing sidings
2. Alternative routes
3. Provide passenger rail service on the existing track without improvements
4. Build the new second track on the west side (Kelso-Cima Road side) of the existing track

For this reason, this EA evaluates only the Proposed Action and the No Action alternative in further detail.

SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action will cause negligible adverse impacts, minor adverse impacts, short term impacts, and beneficial impacts to Preserve resources and values. In general, the Proposed Action involves trade-offs between temporary impacts to transportation, air quality, natural ambient sound, biological resources, recreation, and aesthetics with long term beneficial effects on most of these. Most of the temporary impacts would occur only during construction, which is expected to last a maximum of 24 months.

The Proposed Action contains specific avoidance and minimization measures designed to reduce negative impacts to resources within the Preserve and provide long term enhancement of others. Measures such as an active biological monitoring program to protect sensitive and non-sensitive species from harm and communication protocols that establish decision makers and outline authorities. Measures such as the installation of semi-permanent tortoise exclusion fencing and a revegetation program will serve to enhance biological resources over the long term. The measures also include specific Best Management Practices (BMPs) that minimize the effects of construction disturbances.

No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative will cause no temporary short term impacts that would occur under the Proposed Action. There would be no construction activity so the associated disturbances of transportation, air quality, natural ambient sound, recreation, aesthetics, and biological resources would not occur. The Preserve however would fail to realize all of the beneficial long term

effects of the Proposed Action such as improvements to visitor safety, and the revegetation of disturbed areas among others. Probably the most significant, includes the loss of improved transportation options for the public, revegetation of currently disturbed sites, and loss of the opportunity to acquire 445 acres of non-federal land within the Preserve.